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SUBJECT: CAN NATIONALISM FILL JORDAN'S POLITICAL VOID?

REF: A. AMMAN 4430

¶B. AMMAN 4733

¶C. ADNAN ABU ODEH - "JORDANIANS PALESTINIANS AND THE HASHEMITE KINGDOM" (1999)

¶D. AMMAN 4584

¶E. AMMAN 543

¶F. AMMAN 1183

¶G. AMMAN 4692

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador David Hale
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: Throughout the recently concluded election season, Post was exposed to an undercurrent of discontent with the structure of Jordan's political system. Urban elites and tribal notables alike recognized that the current fractured, incoherent political discourse prevents progress on the issues that matter. Many worry about the lack of a political counterweight to the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the only grouping in Jordan worthy of the term "political party," but which has itself been reduced to a mere six seats (from seventeen) in the parliament.

¶12. (C) Perhaps counter-intuitively in this tribally and politically divided society, nationalism is a theme that could potentially unite pro-government politicians and their supporters. Poll data and anecdotal evidence point to the possibility of an emerging nationalist trend, but in the end only government (and in particular, royal) support will make it a concrete reality. In addition, any nationalist politician faces a significant stumbling block on the question of Palestinian identity. Nonetheless, the time may be ripe for a realignment in Jordanian politics. End Summary.

The Winter of Discontent

¶13. (C) November 20 parliamentary elections in Jordan served as a backdrop for broad expressions of discontent with the current structure of Jordan's political system. While few candidates, voters, or media outlets are yet talking about it openly, there is an undercurrent of frustration that ran through many of our conversations about the elections and what they were expected to produce. Jordanians cite many causes for concern regarding the mechanisms of politics in the country: the dominance of tribes in selecting Jordan's political leadership, the ideological threat of the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the corruption and poor services offered up by an inefficient and bloated bureaucracy, and a feeling that there is a lack of leadership and direction from the established political elite. The general sense among many is that there is a void at the center of Jordanian political life that the monarchy cannot and should not fill.

Unhappiness With Tribal Dominance

¶14. (C) A wide spectrum of contacts is expressing frustration with the degree of tribal influence in Jordanian politics.

As expected, this sentiment is most widely heard among members of the urban elite, many of whom are disconnected from, disillusioned with, or have no tribal roots. The brahmin of Jordan's wealthier areas cite tribalism as the primary factor that keeps Jordan down. "Most candidates are running on their personal agenda," a candidate from Madaba complained. "They have no sense of what the country needs." The elite see tribal politics as the means by which largely uneducated politicians manipulate their largely uneducated supporters into maintaining their lifestyle of prestige, connections, and corruption. Once the political strength of the tribes is broken or diluted, the Amman elite argue, the country can go forward with true political reform based on rational principals.

¶5. (C) What is perhaps surprising is that many of the politicians who rely on tribal support (Ref A) are telling us the same thing, albeit with slightly different reasoning. Tribal politicians frequently state that they are tired of dealing with constituents who constantly badger them with requests for services, leaving them little to no time to deal with the pressing policy issues of the day. In a typical example, a candidate from Balqa (Salt) in central Jordan complained: "The people are trapped in this system of wasata ('connections'). Even parliament is part of it now. The tribal system is a glass ceiling for candidates who want to deal with issues and who long for equality under the law." Many tribal politicians see themselves as caught in a trap of their own making. Perhaps they would rather run issue-based campaigns that expand beyond the direct needs of their constituents, but more than one has articulated the view that, in order to be elected, they have to "play the game" and cater to the service-based expectations of the tribes that support them.

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¶6. (SBU) During a debate in Karak, candidates were asked why the tribal structure of Jordanian politics continued to stand in the way of the emergence of political parties. Two of the candidates conceded that the lack of coherent political parties in Jordan was a problem, saying that "hopefully someday" the tribes would fade into the background. The third put it far more honestly. Responding unapologetically in a single sentence, he said: "Tribes are the nation's political parties."

¶7. (U) King Abdullah has certainly expressed his frustration with tribal dominance and the lack of coherent political parties in Jordan. During his opening address to the new parliament, the King said that "public service allows no room for interests that are related to narrow tribal affiliation." During the election campaign, in an interview with the semi-official Petra News Agency on November 6, the King said: "I had hoped that 2007 would be a year of political parties with realistic and clear programs, but we still need more time and effort to achieve that objective." In a November 18 interview with Germany's Der Spiegel, the King stated that "we need fewer, but broader parties - ideally two, three, or four - representing the left and the right wing and the political center."

The Lack of Political Parties: An Opening for the IAF?

¶8. (C) Contacts across the political spectrum see the lack of organized political parties in Jordan as an opening that the IAF exploits. While voters dealt a blow to the IAF on election day (Ref B), contacts point out that even a weakened IAF is still the only coherent bloc in parliament. During the campaign, a candidate from Irbid said that the organizational support of a political party, along with a national campaign that is well understood by the voters, remains a distinct advantage for any IAF candidate.

¶9. (C) In a political system dominated by tribal blocs and

concerned mostly with narrow local interests, the "independent" politicians that will remain the majority in Jordan's parliament are doomed to irrelevance in the eyes of many of their supporters. Rather than forming an organized alternative to the IAF, it is thought that they will remain content to merely block its political agenda (perhaps in addition to obstructing reform efforts of the government). Candidates and voters express their hunger for a political formation that can express a moderate, pro-government stance and stand as a bulwark against the IAF. A Madaba candidate said of current efforts, "you can gather mercenaries (to counter the IAF), but not a political party." Another Madaba candidate remarked that "the government needs a coherent group of allies in parliament to be a supporting actor." An Irbid candidate longed for "political parties that represent ideas" like the ones that exist in "advanced countries".

The Palestinian Factor

¶10. (C) The elephant in the room when discussing Jordanian politics, of course, is Palestinian identity. In the nearly four decades since Black September, Palestinians have, by and large, found themselves ever more isolated politically as the regime has ensured security and stability by relying on East Banker control of critical institutions (Ref C). Jordan's tribe-centered political system and under-representation of Palestinians in the electoral system help guarantee that the levers of governmental power - the security forces, the bureaucracy - remain in East Banker hands. In doing so the regime is hedging against the perceived ambivalence of Palestinian-origin Jordanians towards the state, while waiting for a two-state solution which should, at least in theory, put an end to dual loyalties (by allowing partisans of Palestine to return there while those truly loyal to Jordan remain in their adopted country). Thus, while Jordanians of Palestinian origin may long for an alternative that will address their place in Jordanian society, give them a credible voice, and ensure access to the services that the government provides, they are generally relegated to the sidelines of Jordanian politics. (High-profile exceptions such as former PM Taher al-Masri tend, in fact, to prove the rule.)

¶11. (C) The King has indicated to the Ambassador that he once attempted to foster the creation of a pro-government, non-tribal, pro-business party. By default, the probable leaders of such a party are of Palestinian origin, yet when the King encouraged them to form such a party, they balked. They were fearful that even if they organized around issues unrelated to their Palestinian identity, their background would be used against them, and they would be accused of advocating a "foreign" (i.e., Palestinian) agenda. There is

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an even stronger bias against any political party based on a perceived Palestinian identity. Most Palestinian-origin politicians we spoke to in the recently concluded election season worked under the assumption that campaigning on the issue of, or being seen to appeal to, Palestinian identity would simply not be tolerated by the government (Ref D). This situation must contribute to political apathy in a society with a majority of Jordanians of Palestinian origin.

Fitful Attempts to Create an Alternative

¶12. (C) There have been some fleeting attempts by minor politicians to form political blocs or candidate lists that could stand for the government and against the IAF in parliament. Yet without a unifying ideology to back up their pro-government stance or a charismatic figure to lead them, these efforts seem destined to fail. Even politicians associated with such movements are keen to put some distance between themselves and the political parties they allegedly belong to. Fifteen proto-parties kept their candidate lists

in the recent elections secret, for fear that voters would smell weakness. The National Democratic Trend (sometimes translated as "National Democratic Stream") was the only political movement with the courage to list at least some of its candidates - a modest grouping of seven declared and twelve "secret" candidates across Jordan. None of them were elected.

¶13. (C) In its analysis of the elections, the National Democratic Institute speculated that the lower number of IAF deputies in the current parliament could create an opening for the scattered members of these small political parties to make a name for themselves - "the opening is there for political parties to exploit." The opening is certainly there, but these small parties are ill-suited to take advantage of it. Without the leadership necessary to bring doubters into the fold and proclaim a broad agenda, parliamentarians from Jordan's existing political parties will continue to make little to no impact on the daily lives of Jordanian citizens.

¶14. (C) Ziad Matarneh, who ran for a parliamentary seat in Karak, was one of the declared National Democratic Trend candidates. A former Ba'athist who has been part of several past abortive attempts at political parties, Matarneh is realistic about the chances for a coherent political grouping to challenge the IAF in the parliament. In a pre-election conversation, he expected that fewer than five members of the new parliament would be part of any political party, let alone the one that he represents. "In the last election, we went to the government and tried to convince them to support the idea of political parties," he says. "They couldn't agree on whether to support us or not, and eventually the idea just faded away." Matarneh suspects that political groupings like his suffer from a chicken and egg syndrome: the government wants a strong political party to balance the IAF's influence, but is not willing to invest political prestige and effort into nascent political movements whose future is unclear.

¶15. (C) Parliament speaker Abdulhadi Al-Majali made an attempt to unite Jordan's personality-based political parties under one centrist, pro-government umbrella in 1997. The effort produced a wave of optimism in Jordanian society which was dashed as politicians failed to come to a consensus on questions of leadership. In June 2007 (prior to municipal elections held in July), the speaker's second cousin Amjad Al-Majali gave it a shot, this time with rumored support from the royal court (Ref E). The second attempt to bring Jordan's political parties together also languished under the weight of personalities, political disagreements, and issues of official sponsorship, ultimately failing to produce a broader political entity.

¶16. (C) The recently passed amendments to the political parties law, set to take effect in 2008, will raise the bar for future efforts to form a centrist, pro-government bloc (Ref F). The retroactive requirement of five hundred founders will surely put most of Jordan's boutique-sized parties out of business, and will make it all but impossible to create such narrow parties in the future. It is still unclear whether Jordanian politicians are up to the task of reaching across tribal and political boundaries to fulfill the stricter requirements of the new law, but so far there are few rumblings that any one politician can garner enough broad-based support to do so.

Is Big Tent Nationalism the Solution?

¶17. (C) Throughout our discussions with candidates and voters during the campaign season, we heard consistent, vocal

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frustration with the fractious nature of Jordan's political system. Many have articulated a sense of political void in

the pro-government camp, but as of yet no entity or personality has effectively consolidated an idea of how to fill it. Tribal loyalties are often cited as the main reason for this, but it is clear that those tribal loyalties cover over the potentially more divisive issues of class, income, the urban-rural disconnect, and the Palestinian-East Banker split, among others. Jordan's political structure remains unreformed not merely because of the lack of vision of its politicians, but also because the ideological and policy splits are perhaps deeper than many realize.

¶18. (C) The one issue that may already be emerging as a rallying point for pro-government politicians is nationalism. Many Jordanians still identify with the slogan "Jordan First" ("Al-Urdun Awwalan"), part of a pro-regime publicity campaign which appeared around seven years ago following King Abdullah's accession to the throne. The slogan still frequently appears on official pictures of the King and adorned many campaign posters in the last election. The word "nation" was frequently used in election propaganda for both tribal candidates and urban liberals. Tribal candidates use it in a local sense - the nation can be strengthened through the services and infrastructure that its people demand. Urban liberals use it in a more patriotic sense - the nation deserves the prestige and standing in the world that we seek to give it. The vagueness of the term "nation" ("watan") is the main advantage it offers in terms of bringing Jordan's disparate political forces together. It offers them a way to maintain their local political roots while transitioning to a more organized, ideology-based political system.

¶19. (C) Abatah Tawaiha, who serves as the Dean of Students at Mu'tah University in Karak, sees nationalism as a growing force among youth in particular. He says that an opportunity is being created by a decline in the IAF's popularity and a sense on campus that the tribal system has run its course. Tawaiha sees nationalism as an ascendant trend among the students he teaches. "They are beginning to see how the tribal structure constricts them," he remarks. "We encourage them to look at the nation instead of just their families or their tribes. We are convincing them that 'Jordan First' is the best option." The recent elections may have also pointed towards a breakdown in tribal discipline, with several candidates running against the "will of the tribe" as expressed in caucuses or councils of elders (Ref A). Election results show that tribal loyalties are still a major factor in Jordanian politics, but there are nonetheless cracks in the veneer.

¶20. (U) Poll data supports the conclusion that a nationalist political party could garner significant support in Jordan. International Republican Institute (IRI) polling over the past two years shows consistent voter identification with a "Jordanian nationalist" tendency - a number that hovers around the forty percent mark. This stands in marked contrast to identification with Islamism, which has declined ten percent in the last two years to its current fourteen percent mark, and Arab nationalism, which consistently polls at around six percent support.

Comment: A Realignment?

¶22. (C) Jordanian politics may be in the process of realignment. The new "kamikaze cabinet" of Nader Dahabi, backed strongly by the King, is committed to reforming the nature of Jordanian politics (Ref G). The electoral defeat of the IAF created an opening for pro-government politicians (Ref B). Voters and politicians alike are ready for new political formations, recognizing that there is a void in the center of current political discourse. The campaign season served to underline the need for a coherent political formation to occupy the moderate, pro-government, and largely East Bank center of the political scene. Nationalism is deep within the political rumblings we encounter - no one is referring to it directly as a political force or a rallying point. Yet the fact that it implicitly undergirds an increasing number of our discussions with candidates and

their constituents shows that nationalism could offer the traction necessary to pull Jordan's disparate political interests together in a way that none of the current ineffective groupings can.

¶21. (C) Even so, Jordanian nationalism will have to deal with Palestinian identity - and confront East Banker nativism - if it is indeed to unite all Jordanians. Palestinians continue to see "Jordan First" as a not-so-veiled implication that they are putting Jordan second. The fact that some candidates are seeking to build East Banker-West Banker coalitions under the banner is a promising start, but overcoming decades of mutual suspicion (and entrenched tribal

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interests in maintaining their job- and service-supplying stranglehold on the military, security apparatus, and bureaucracy) will be a long-term process, and one unlikely to fully flower until there is a permanent two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given the risks and the stakes, it is uncertain how much tacit political support a nationalist movement would garner from the government or the royal court. Without implicit royal backing and some way of dealing with the Palestinian issue, any attempt will, like the efforts currently underway, be stillborn.

Hale